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Closeness and Conflict: The Discourse of Domestic Discord Across English and Spanish-speaking Communities

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Introduction

Research on conflict talk and verbal aggression has burgeoned over the past 25 years, since the publication of seminal works on the topic such as Grimshaw's (1990) collection of papers on "arguments in conversations" in a range of settings, and earlier works such as Schifffrin (1984) on Jewish argument as sociability. Work on the discourse of children's arguments or disputes (see Goodwin, 1982; Maynard 1985, Sheldon 1990, among others) also sowed the seeds of what has become an important research topic. Indeed, the creation of this very journal several years ago is testament to the fertile ground for such discourse analysis.

Under different guises, in recent years there has been a plethora of research on conflict talk in institutional interactions, including the (semi) private and the public spheres. Domains that have been examined comprise, for example, mediated disputed resolution (Stewart and Maxwell 2010), workplace conflict and conflict resolution (Papke, 2016; Scott, 2015; Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011, among others), educational contexts (see, for example, Fuentes Rodríguez and Alcaide Lara (2009) and Arcidiacono and Bova's (2017) collections of papers which include other domains too); media talk in the context of talk shows, **political interviews**, and reality television (see Brenes Peña 2011; Fuentes Rodríguez and Alcaide Lara 2008; Fuentes Rodríguez and Placencia 2013;

García-Gómez 2012; Lorenzo-Dus 2007, 2008, 2009; Placencia and Fuentes Rodríguez 2013) or televised political debate (see González 2010; Lorenzo-Dus 2009) as well as social media (see among others, Anderson and Cermele 2014; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Lorenzo-Dus, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, and Bou-Franch 2011; Mancera Rueda and Pano Alamán 2013).

Nonetheless, few studies have focused on the familial or other private spheres of interaction. This special issue aims to begin to fill this void by offering analyses of family conflict discourse and conflict talk among other interactants of close social distance, such as close friends and housemates, in two languages and across a range of cultural contexts where Spanish and English are spoken. We limit our focus to two languages as a springboard for further developments on family conflict discourse in other sociolinguistic contexts.

It is certainly true that public discourse of late, characterized by conflict and aggression on both sides of the Atlantic and across continents, has dominated news outlets. Indeed, if we are to say anything at all about the present state of the world, we would be correct in stating that we are in a conflict era. The “argument culture” that Deborah Tannen already described two decades ago, as characterized by “unrelenting contention” and an approach to the world “in an adversarial frame of mind” (Tannen 1998, 3), seems to be exacerbated at present by the wide reach and immediacy of social media. To this, few would disagree. What we propose in this volume is stepping back from public discourse that surrounds us daily to take a deeper look at where everyday/mundane conflict takes place – in our very families, with our most intimate interlocutors. The conflict settings we study here, however, are not limited to close family

members, but include interactions with close friends and housemates, as in Haugh and Sinkeviciute's study of interactions among *Big Brother* contestants. While 'housemates' on *Big Brother* start as strangers, their relationship can be said to quickly develop into an intimate level owing to the prolonged and intensive period of close contact and shared everyday experiences.

To this point, several decades ago the late Nessa Wolfson (Boxer's dissertation advisor at the University of Pennsylvania) proposed her 1988 theory of what she called "The Bulge." This was a theory of social distance that posited, at least in US English, we employ very similar types of speech behavior with those at both extremes of the social distance continuum, strangers at one end and intimates at the other. The Bulge theory was based on intuitive interpretations of Wolfson's own research on compliments (see, for example, Wolfson 1981, 1983). However, when Boxer (1993) plotted out her data on responses to indirect complaints, she found quite different results that disputed a sweeping generalization about social distance. Depending on the speech act (e.g. commiseration, advice, contradictions), Boxer found that the Bulge was skewed either toward one extreme or the other. That is to say, regarding conflict language in families, we tend to take little care with our speech behavior, using much more aggressive language with close family members than we do with interlocutors of other more distant relationships (including friends). Commiserations abounded with both acquaintances and with strangers, but fell off dramatically within close relationships. Advice and contradiction responses, considered face threatening acts in the context analyzed by Boxer (1993), almost never occurred among strangers, but abounded with intimates. Notwithstanding this finding, no generalizations can be made regarding societies in

which languages other than English are spoken (and across socioeconomic groups as well as in other speech communities outside of northeastern US cities). Advice giving may be an affiliation strategy among friends and family in some regional/national groups as highlighted by Hernández Flores (2002), for example, in the context of interactions among family and friends in Spain.

Moreover, there is some evidence that the forceful expression of one's opinions, including direct disagreement, may be a positive activity among Spaniards, for example. This behavior has been linked to the notion of 'self-affirmation', first highlighted by Thurén (1989, 217)) in her study of gender roles in a Valencia neighborhood, whereby "it is important to express your opinions forcefully and persuasively" as "one wants to show-prove-convince others of what one really thinks". Spaniards in various studies (see Fant 1989; Bravo 1999; Häggkvist and Fant 2000; Hernández Flores 2004; Placencia and Mancera Rueda 2011, among others) have been described as valuing self-affirmation. For instance, Häggkvist and Fant (2000) examined informal discussions among Spaniards, in contrast with similar discussions among Swedes; they found that it was common for the former, unlike the latter set of participants, to express opposite views straight away. They regard this tendency among Spaniards in their study as displaying an orientation towards self-affirmation. Another more recent example can be found in Placencia and Mancera Rueda's (2011) study of small talk among bar tenders and customers in bars in Seville where the forceful expression of opinions and disagreement, without causing offence, also surfaces. It is important to point out that Placencia and Mancera Rueda found this behaviour in bars where bar tenders and customers are familiar with each other and not in bars where they lacked familiarity. In other words, social and situational factors can play

a role in its occurrence. Thus, while self-affirmation has been identified as a type of behaviour some groups of Spaniards tend to orient to, again, one has to be cautious about generalizations.

In brief, as with all qualitative sociolinguistic research, little can be said regarding to what extent the findings are at all generalizable. Because of this limitation, further research in different communities around the world merit scrutiny regarding familial conflict discourse.

The relevance of the proposed special issue is the following: conflict permeates everyday life, and one could argue that conflict begins at home, with our very closest interlocutors. As such, the construction of this kind of talk in the private sphere deserves considerable attention. As the old, but still current English adage “intimacy breeds contempt,” and its roughly equivalent Spanish version “la confianza da asco” suggest, we may be less civil with those that are closest to us by being too chummy, placing too many demands on them, being discourteous, and generally taking for granted the relationship. This seems to be the case, at least in some societies and in some language groups. This kind of uncivil behavior can be seen, for example, in Boxer’s and García-Gómez’s studies in this volume. Adversarial talk, however, does not have to be conducted in an uncivil manner. Indeed, Clancy (this volume), for example, identifies the frequent use of certain mitigators in his corpus of family conflict talk in Irish English that he examined. As a matter of fact, interpersonal conflict may not necessarily manifest itself as explicit discord, and may be dealt with in more subtle ways, by using, for example, avoidance or token politeness strategies (see Placencia 2008, 2011). However, when it comes to explicit manifestations of discord, as Haugh and Sinkeviciute (this volume) point out,

while much of the literature on conflict thus far has focused on the ways in which people may *cause* offence, we have concentrated less on the ways in which participants *take* offence.

Our goal is, on the one hand, to bring to the fore various named conflictual communicative activities/practices in which intimates engage. These include such speech behaviors as ‘bickering’ (Boxer and Radice) or ‘guilting’ (Johnson). On the other hand, we also aim to identify actions such as accusations that initiate or fuel/exacerbate conflict talk (García-Gómez; Haugh and Sinkeviciute; Kaiser; Kalbermatten) as well as actions that help diffuse it (Clancy; Kalbermatten). Additionally, one study (i.e., García-Gómez) offers a contrastive perspective, exploring similarities and differences in how conflict is managed through talk across **two** sociocultural groups. On the other hand, Haugh and Sinkeviciute enrich their analysis of accusations among housemates in *Big Brother* by drawing on data corresponding to two versions of the show, representing two different varieties of Spanish. While the majority of studies in this special issue reflect conflict talk in face-to-face interactions, one study shows how this kind of talk has been extended to the online sphere, enabled by technology (see García-Gómez). Finally, we aim to show how different theoretical and methodological approaches can be employed to shed light on different aspects of the discourse of family conflict talk. Indeed, the studies included herein employ a range of methodological perspectives, from ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic, to corpus-focused and conversation analytic. The data on which the articles are based range from a case study (Johnson) to a large sub-corpus (Clancy), with everything in between.

In this special edition of JLAC we propose taking a closer look at how interactants in relationships of close social distance, in a range of settings in English and Spanish-speaking contexts, perceive, co-construct and/or manage conflict talk in situated communicative activities and how this may vary across sociocultural groups. Thus, the studies included here analyze various linguistic strategies employed in both aggressive conflict talk as well as conflict avoidance in English and Spanish-speaking contexts.

The special issue starts with a paper by Diana Boxer and Joseph Radice on the speech behaviour commonly known as “bickering.” The article first disambiguates bickering from other related speech behaviours such as complaining and nagging. The analysis deals with the themes on which bickering focuses, the relationships among the bickering interlocutors, and the speech acts that initiate the bickering exchanges. Using ethnographic methodology, the study analyses spontaneous speech exchanges among family members, close friends and roommates supplemented by ethnographic interviews from members of the North American communities in which the data were collected. Thus, the paper provides insight into native folk beliefs about the speech behaviour under scrutiny that supplements the analysis of moves in the spontaneous speech exchanges.

Rebekah Johnson’s article is on a speech behaviour commonly found in family discourse: “guilting.” This case study examines the discursive co-construction of identity within family interaction among adult children and their parents in one US Midwest-American family. Employing interactional sociolinguistic methodology, the data focuses on family conversations during holiday mealtimes when family members who typically live far apart came together. In the close analysis of several longer data segments, the discursive practices related to “guilting” are analyzed as strategies used to construct adult

child identity and accomplish particular interactional goals. This small collection of examples of “guilting” from the case study of one American family are candidate practices for family talk and identity construction, in particular, as well as for naturally occurring interaction, in general. The article adds to the existing literature on identity work; moreover, the microanalysis of the pragmatic functions employed by parents and adult children within the institution of the family is indicative of larger cultural practices.

Brian Clancy offers a corpus pragmatic approach to the study of family conflict talk, based on a sub-corpus of family data of the Limerick Corpus of Irish English. A difficulty for researchers working with large corpora can be how to access the relevant communicative activity that they are interested in. Accessing conflict talk in this case is certainly not a straightforward matter, as this kind of talk is normally developed over a number of turns. Clancy shows how the use of linguistic ‘hooks’ (Rühlemann, 2010) can effectively provide access into family conflict episodes constructed around disagreement. Indeed, Clancy is the first one, as far as we know, to use this approach in the study of conflict talk when employing corpora not designed for the study of such talk.

Next, we move into analyses in various Spanish-speaking communities. From a CA-informed perspective, Haugh and Sinkeviciute offer an analysis of accusations based on a corpus of interactions among ‘housemates’ in *Big Brother Argentina* and *Big Brother Spain*. Arising from the examination of multiparty episodes extracted from their corpus is their claim that accusations are actions through which accusers display that they have taken offence for a particular behavior of their interlocutor, and that, likewise, recipients of accusations display through various means in their response whether they are treating an action as an accusation (or not). In other words, Haugh and Sinkeviciute

highlight the importance of examining both how accusations are formulated to display “taking offence”, and how they are responded to, to ratify (or not) a previous action as an accusation. In the *Big Brother* context, interactants live in close proximity, with interpersonal conflict quickly emerging around mundane tasks that they have to perform (e.g. cooking, cleaning, washing), thus providing a fertile ground for the study of accusations and conflict talk more generally. Haugh and Sinkeviciute’s study is also intended to be a contribution to the examination of accusations in informal settings, which, unlike formal, institutional settings such as courtrooms, have not received much attention. They are right in arguing that the formulation of accusations in informal settings such as the *Big Brother* context is bound to be different from that of courtroom accusations in important ways.

Heather Kaiser’s article on refusals in Uruguayan couples talk combines qualitative and quantitative analysis. The data, deriving from audio-recordings in the small community of Rosario, focuses on two phenomena: 1) linguistic formulas inherent in politic and non-politic refusal strategies; and 2) how post refusal small talk is used to ameliorate rejection. Kaiser finds evidence that, in these couples at least, the women partners neither shied away from conflict nor went to lengths to save face. Indeed, in Rosario at least, there is ample evidence of language aggression that, in other communities and with more distant interlocutors **perhaps**, might be considered rude or offensive. Kaiser deals with the question, “what could be the causes of eschewing the constraint on consensus in order to embrace conflict?”

Moving on to another community in the Spanish-speaking world, Marisa Kalbermatten analyzes the role of verbal irony in conflict talk among relatives and

friends in Argentina. Her data consist of excerpts from ten multiparty conversations among relatives and friends from the city of Santa Fe. Building on work on conflict talk (see e.g. Schifffrin 1985; Norrick and Spitz 2008) and verbal irony (see Attardo 2000; Pexman and Olineck 2002; Padilla García and Alvarado Ortega 2010, among many others), Kalbermatten's analysis aptly illustrates how irony can be employed to end, extend, defuse, or initiate a dispute among relatives and friends.

The final article included in this Special Issue offers up a contrastive perspective between Spanish speakers in Spain and British English speakers. Antonio García-Gómez's paper analyzes data from **digitally mediated** family conflict on WhatsApp. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses of the interactions of seven Spanish families (45 members) and eight British families (46 members), the article explores how these family members initiate, manage and exacerbate conflict in the WhatsApp platform. The impetus behind this research comes from two directions: 1) the need to study how new technologies are playing a key role in the way family members not only communicate, but also the way they maintain interpersonal relationships; and 2) an interest in exploring how this mobile phone application (among other tools of **digitally** mediated communication) means a shift in the use of the technology as we move away from 'the use of technology to support an individual, towards the use of technology to support the relationships between individuals (Brown 2000, 4). García-Gómez also seeks to answer some basic questions about whether there may be some gender and/or cultural-based differences in the way(s) these family members negotiate their identities in conflict talk.

It is hoped that this Special Issue will act as a spur to further research on a topic of significant interest and importance as domestic conflict talk, in a wider range of contexts

within Spanish- and English-speaking communities, and further afield, in order to bring to light not yet described conflict-generating activities, as well as the range of discursive mechanisms people employ to perform different actions geared at creating, escalating and diffusing conflict, and also at avoiding conflict. If indeed conflict begins with our most intimate interlocutors, **and given its ubiquitousness in interpersonal relations**, the study of the discourse of discord has the potential to ameliorate relationships not only in the domestic domain, but also beyond.

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